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Abstract:
Purpose
This paper aims to suggest a shift in thinking about how to improve gender inclusion in organizations, as well as offering a number of practical action points.
Design/methodology/approach
This paper takes a perspective based on the authors' own ongoing research, as well as synthesis of existing insights into gender inclusion in organizations.
Findings
To retain top talent and improve organizational climate, the authors need to re-think how the authors measure the success of organizational inclusion policies. Specifically, the paper suggests moving from numbers and targets to looking at the quality of gender inclusion in the workplace. The paper explains why this shift in thinking is important and how to approach it in practice.
Practical implications
The paper provides strategic insights into and practical thinking about ways in which progressive organizations can continue to improve gender equality.
Originality/value
The paper makes a provocative call for a change of perspective on gender inclusion in organizations based on cutting-edge research and puts forward action points in an accessible format.

Introduction

Inclusion of women has long been viewed as a critical priority in contemporary organizations, and most companies offer a variety of policies beyond the legal minimum to retain their female talent. However, consider the following questions:

Q1.

If 50 per cent of staff in an organization are women, does it necessarily mean that the workplace is fully inclusive?

Q2.

Have contemporary workplaces completely eradicated inequality?

Q3.

Has gender equality been achieved?

These are some of the questions debated in a series of recent seminars on Gendered Inclusion in Contemporary Organizations funded by Economic and Social Research Council.

Given a dramatic increase in the number of women in the UK engaged in paid employment, standing at over 67 per cent in 2016 (Office for National Statistics, 2016), it is easy to assume that gender inclusion has been achieved. Indeed, the former chief of Marks and Spenser has suggested that "women have never had it so good" (Hill, 2009) and, in the words of Facebook's

CEO, Sheryl Sandberg, women simply need to "lean in" to succeed because most gender barriers have apparently been dismantled.

While it is important to celebrate women's success, experienced leaders and HR strategists know that, as with any other complex organizational issue, it is important to remain vigilant. After all, despite recent optimism, research continues to inform us that women still experience a gender pay gap in many organizations, that they tend to be concentrated in less well-paid and less prestigious sectors of the economy, and that they still comprise only 8.6 per cent of directors in large UK firms (Women on Boards, 2015). So why is this still the case?

In the early days of the struggle for equality, the focus was on identifying various patterns and mechanisms of exclusion. With the recent rise of equal opportunities, legislation and the mainstreaming of equality and diversity policies, the discussion has shifted to celebrating inclusion and appreciating the importance of hiring more women in organizations. We suggest that the next step in tackling gender and diversity issues in organizations is to shift our attention from numbers and targets to the *quality* of gender inclusion and equality in the workplace.

From numbers to quality: asking different questions

Many organizations strive to hire more women, and, of course, if half your workforce are women, it is a cause for celebration. After all, this means that the organization is already doing something right. However, it is important not to fall into the trap of counting heads, ticking equality boxes and then forgetting about it. To sustain competitiveness and innovation by recruiting and retaining the best talent, organizations need to ask new and critical questions about the quality of gender inclusion.

We know that generalized statistics can be deceptive: for instance, they tend to obscure many nuances. An experienced HR strategist who takes a proactive approach to equality issues will probably ask not only "how many" but also "how" and "what types" of women are included in an organization. Where are they located? What roles do they occupy? What kind of women are they? Has our organization managed to challenge some of the gender stereotypes and cultural biases?

Although we are used to thinking of exclusion as negative and inclusion as always positive, looking beyond this rather simplistic bipolar view may open up new avenues for improvement. So, where to start?

Thinking creatively and strategically about inclusion

Most companies that embed gender equality in their corporate strategy tend to look beyond numbers and try to ensure deeper change to tackle ingrained gender inequalities. Some recent initiatives include unconscious bias awareness training, mentoring schemes for women, leadership training, and so on. These initiatives are important; however, they deal with only one side of the gender inequality coin – the individual. They may empower individuals within companies and help them to take responsibility and action. Yet, to tackle the quality of inclusion strategically, the other side of the coin must also be addressed – the responsibility and actions of the organization. Organizational responsibilities include monitoring and modifying organizational structures and processes that systematically hinder the quality and effectiveness of inclusion.

Some important areas that may need to be considered have been highlighted in recent academic research. First, it is important to address "horizontal" skew. Research has highlighted that women are concentrated in low-paid sectors of the economy, and in less well-paid and less prestigious departments within organizations. To address this aspect of inclusion, it is important to ask: where are the women? Are they concentrated in particular areas and departments within an organization? If so, why is this the case? We know that a "preference" for working in a certain department is not always a genuine choice. Is there something about the culture of some departments that makes women avoid them and/or prefer others? Is there something about the job advertisement and recruitment processes that results in such distribution? By pigeonholing women into particular roles that seem "more suitable", the company may lose out on innovative ideas.

Second, it is important to address "vertical" skew. Research shows that while there may be equal numbers of men and women at middle levels of management, the ratio becomes skewed dramatically in the top positions. To address this aspect of inclusion, it is important to pay close attention to the pipeline and organizational processes. We know that men and women enter work with relatively similar ambitions to succeed, so what organizational hurdles may lead women to scale down their ambitions? What level of support do they receive throughout their career path? Do men and women have equal *access* to opportunities? Are promotion practices fair and transparent? Does the company rely on recruitment agencies that do not consider gender equality as a priority? What are the profiles of "typical" women who make it to the top? Is there diversity in their profiles, strengths, backgrounds and pathways to the top? If not, why are only certain kinds of women able to succeed?

Third, organizations need to quality-check. Research suggests that although there may be a similar number of women and men in employment, more women are employed on a part-time basis, on less favorable contracts, and in jobs for which they are over-qualified. To scrutinize this aspect of inclusion, it is vital to pay attention to the quality of women's jobs in an organization. Do men and women in similar positions and levels of seniority have equal work conditions and equal pay? Do more women than men seem to "opt out" into part-time work or leave work, particularly at crucial moments in their lives, for instance, during pregnancy or when childcare or elderly care responsibilities arise? As we know, a "choice" is not always a genuine choice. In other words, it is important to examine whether work conditions – for example, lack of support practices such as flexible working and parental benefits, or the nature of organizational culture such as demands around presenteeism or long working hours – might enable them to make different choices.

Finally, organizations should adopt a "balcony view". As mentioned previously, embedding individual solutions for equality and diversity into organizational culture is important, but the responsibility of the organization is also to conduct systematic assessments of the gender impact and outcomes of its various structures, as well as new policies and procedures. This is because inequalities tend to find new, subtle and unexpected ways of reappearing. Too often, organizations introduce a new policy and then firefight its negative impact on equality. Reversing this pattern and making gender assessments before new policies and procedures are introduced may allow smoother and more sustainable organizational development and change.

Staying ahead of the curve

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of issues that require consideration when moving toward improvements in the quality of gender inclusion in organizations. Moreover, we have looked

at gender equality as an example, but this also applies to other aspects of diversity in organizations.

However, the broader point made here is that regular and systematic reviews are required when developing inclusive gender and diversity policies and initiatives in organizations. Specifically, it is vital to focus on the quality of equality and inclusion alongside numerical measures in order to foster *and maintain* the inclusive organizational climate that is so crucial to retaining a competitive edge and staying ahead of the curve.

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